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Inflated claims, new PC trends highlight Comdex trade show

The "rite of spring" for many people in the personal computer industry is the Comdex/Spring trade show, held each year at this time. It took place last week in Atlanta.

Along with about 50,000 others, I made the trek to "Mecca" to hear the industry gurus, view the latest PC products from 700 vendors, and listen to all the inflated claims.

As you might expect, every self-respecting computer manufacturer and software supplier — who could afford to attend — had at least one new product or major product upgrade to promote at the show. After all, that's why they were there — the purpose of the show was to convince computer dealers to carry their newest products.

So, with glamour and glitter, hoopla and great exaggeration, the new hardware and software was rolled out.

As a columnist and computer consultant, I always find it fun to attend the Comdex shows. I'm like a kid in a toy store, and enjoy every minute.

But one thing that continues to amaze me is the number of new products that are not yet salable at all. These are the "pre-announced" prototypes — merely demonstration models of future products. Actual delivery to dealers and resale to end-users may be months or even years in the future. And when products are finally shipped, they might be far different from the original prototype.

A perfect example was Microsoft's announcement and demonstration of a product called "Windows" at one of the Comdex shows in 1983. At that time, it was a monochrome product only, with functions and capabilities far different from the actual color products that were eventually shipped in 1985.

Similarly, it was common at this year's show to hear about turbo boards that "turn your PC into a minicomputer" with speeds up to four times faster than the IBM PC

testing, called beta testing, has not yet begun; or when the documentation has not yet been prepared. After a while, I stopped looking at these products and concentrated only on those that could be purchased now.

In my opinion, several trends emerged from the Comdex show that will strongly influence the buying patterns of PC managers and users in the year ahead:

✓ Dozens of low-cost IBM PC, XT and AT clones are now available — many from well-known names in the computer industry. These are not cheap, low-quality copies that are certain to be ignored.

They are cheap, one hundred percent compatible, *high-quality* copies that are certain to be bought by the hundreds of thousands. It's a development that will be welcomed by many PC managers.

✓ Dozens of companies are now making low-cost, perfect copies of IBM's Enhanced Graphics Adapter (EGA) and companion high-resolution color monitor. This development is welcomed by many software companies that take advantage of color in their products, and that are adapting the products for use with windowing products such as Topview, Windows or Deskview. Many PC users will be seduced by these color-supporting programs with high-resolution color output.

✓ The age of integrated, multi-application software — made temporarily popular by Symphony from Lotus and Framework from Ashton-Tate — is over, and has been replaced by the age of windowing software. The integrated products were never considered "state of the art" in their individual components, and they are now being outgunned by the best individual-function products from countless software developers. The users who desire integration are now moving toward use of the windowing products.



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four times faster than the IBM PC AT; or peripherals for Commodore computers that allow IBM PC programs to be run; or 1,000-mega-byte storage media. You could see the prototypes demonstrated, read the fancy four-color literature, and be quoted prices for any quantity you chose to order.

The tip-off often comes when you ask the demonstrator to show a function that's not part of the regular demonstration, or request that the program perform an action in a different sequence. When it can't be done — or if the program bombs while trying — the truth becomes obvious.

Other tip-offs are when delivery is not planned until "early 1987," enough time to reinvent the product from scratch; when user-site

Putting all three new realities together, the most common sight at Comdex was an updated and improved software package, for word processing, accounting or whatever; being demonstrated within a window of Topview, Windows or Deskview; on an AT-clone machine with a EGA-copy and an IBM-compatible, high-resolution color monitor.

The bottom line: For PC managers and users, the ramifications of this new direction in the PC industry are all exciting — lower prices, more products to choose from, software with greater functionality, and prettier screens in full color. What more could we want?

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